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State's budget crisis could derail \$1-billion plan to expand Metra rail service

By: [Paul Merrion](#) August 30, 2010

Now holding at the Metra station: nearly \$1 billion in upgrades for Chicago's commuter rail system, which can't use federal money earmarked years ago for planning until Illinois can cover its share of future construction costs.

Federal transit officials delivered a grim directive this summer, telling Metra to revise its financial plan before tapping money set aside for preliminary engineering, including providing a more realistic estimate of how much state funding will be available for improvements along the Union Pacific-West and Union Pacific-Northwest lines, two of Metra's most heavily traveled routes.

"While it seems likely that state capital funding would continue in some form, a forecast that assumes a growing amount of state funds seems speculative without additional supporting information," says a June 1 e-mail from the Federal Transit Administration obtained under the Freedom of Information Act.

It's another example of the state's fiscal crisis hitting home, and a growing realization by some transportation experts here that many big-scale projects crucial to Chicago's long-range transportation needs may never get off the drawing board.

"We don't have the money," says Metra board member James LaBelle, a vice-president and transportation expert at local planning think tank Chicago Metropolitan 2020. The state's current capital construction program "is not sufficient to do those projects, so that's an issue for sure. That's true for all of Metra's new-start projects."

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The funding uncertainty also raises doubts about two other, higher-profile Metra projects slated for earmarked federal planning money soon: new commuter service to the southeast suburbs and a new, suburb-to-suburb route from Joliet to O'Hare International Airport called the STAR Line. But the two Union Pacific projects are the most immediate concern because they are ready to start preliminary engineering now.

"Given the economy and the state's fiscal crisis, that's going to be a challenge," a Metra spokesman says. "We will have to work with Springfield on that."

Metra officials are scrambling to preserve earmarks for all four projects, totaling about \$29 million, which by law expire Sept. 30 unless the commuter rail agency can start spending the money by then.

In July, Sen. Richard Durbin, D-Ill., inserted an amendment in this year's transportation appropriations bill extending the earmarks for two years, but a similar effort by Chicago Democrats failed in the House. The House and Senate aren't likely to agree on that or most other appropriations bills by the Sept. 30 federal fiscal yearend, which means Metra probably will need another special amendment added to whatever legislation is enacted to keep the federal government operating past that date.

While less flashy, the UP-Northwest and UP-West projects would greatly increase the number of trains serving Chicago, with more frequencies, reverse-commute service and new equipment.

The \$530.7-million upgrade slated for the UP-Northwest line, Metra's longest route and most populated service territory, would mean 24 express trains a day, up from 19 currently, with 74 daily commuter trains vs. 63 now. Metra also wants to add three stations and extend the line to Johnsburg in northeastern McHenry County, about seven miles south of the Wisconsin state line.

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Along the UP-West line, which runs 44 miles from Chicago to Elburn, the \$328-million upgrade would add a third track to part of the route, allowing Metra to increase the express schedule by 50% to 30 trains a day and expand service overall to 80 trains a day, 21 more than now.

In addition to assurances of long-term state funding, the FTAtold Metra that the state will have to pay half of construction costs, not the 30% Metra assumed in its original financial plan.

Federal officials also want a 10% contingency factor added to the budget to cover cost overruns, and a better long-range estimate of repair and replacement costs for existing track, stations and trains.

"You have to show you can do that before you talk about expanding the system," says Randy Blankenhorn, executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. His group recently issued a 30-year Chicago-area transportation plan that stresses the need to maintain the current system. The plan estimates only 2.7% of the \$385 billion projected to be available from all sources of transportation funding by 2040 will be used for new construction, he says, "but these two projects are included in that 2.7%."